

RECREATION

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Graffiti, garbage and vandalism are problems along stretches of the Kulshan Creek Trail in Mount Vernon.



Caring for Kulshan



A bridge along the Kulshan Creek Trail gets a fresh coat of paint from volunteers.

Photos courtesy of Jon Gerondale

Stretch of area trail adopted by club

By VINCE RICHARDSON
Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — Anita Ordoñez and Jon Gerondale have seen the good, the bad and the ugly along the Kulshan Creek Trail.

Ordoñez, the director of multicultural student services at Skagit Valley Community College, walks the trail to work.

Gerondale is the Kulshan Creek neighborhood resource officer for the Mount Vernon Police Department. The trail runs alongside his office.

Both have witnessed the graffiti, garbage, and loiterers that make stretches of the trail not only unsightly but unfriendly.

"The Kulshan Creek walking trail between North 26th Street and North 30th Street is attractive to criminal activity," Gerondale explained. "It's a nice section of trail from an environmental standpoint. It's really a pretty section of the trail with the wetlands and things. But from an aesthetic standpoint, walk-

ing down and seeing the graffiti and the trash is not very nice."

"I walk that trail every day," Ordoñez said. "I noticed what was going on. There was plenty that wasn't very good."

Ordoñez and Gerondale have joined forces to make the trail more appealing to walkers and bikers.

The pair established an Adopt-A-Trail program for the section of the Kulshan Creek Trail between North 26th Street and North 30th Street. The stretch of about 400 yards is the first Adopt-A-Trail program in Mount Vernon.

"I know Jon by working with him through other programs," Ordoñez said. "When we met to discuss the trail, we both could see that something needed to be done. We just had to address how to go about it."

That's when the idea of adopting a portion of the trail was discussed.

"I have a leadership class at the college and

presented it to them," Ordoñez said. "Esmeralda Renteria then took it on as a project. That was last spring."

Renteria and Gerondale made a presentation to Calling All Colors, a club at Skagit Valley College. Ordoñez is its faculty advisor.

The club's members stepped forward and volunteered their time and effort to adopt the section of trail.

Calling All Colors is made up of students who work to create a sense of belonging and unity through diversity.

"Jon and Esmeralda presented a slide show to the club," Ordoñez said. "A lot of them had fears about the trail. They'd heard rumors about some of the things that had supposedly happened along the trail. Jon quickly dispelled those rumors."

Nonetheless, this portion of the trail has its problems.



Photos courtesy of Jon Gerondale

Volunteers work to spruce up the borders along a stretch of the Kulshan Creek Trail.

Kulshan

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"Basically, this is a corridor," Gerondale said. "So there really is no legitimate use on either side of the trail.

"Then in the middle of the trail is this bridge," he added. "So that is where the kids hang out and it's right in the very center of the trail. It's a nice place to sit, they have 200 yards in either direction to see if an officer is coming. If they see an officer, they can ditch whatever they have or run into the wetlands and hide."

What is left in their wake is graffiti, garbage and damage to the bridge. This year, there have been eight calls for police service along the stretch.

"Right now, the bridge is basically an open canvas for graffiti," Gerondale said. "They tug it and we come back and paint over it. There must be 25 coats of paint on that bridge. But we can't just stop, we have to keep trying."

The trail's borders consist of overgrown thickets, which adds to the problem. There's just a lot of room to roam for those causing trouble.

"These illegitimate users on the bridge leave a mess," Gerondale said. "Plus, if you are a family walking down the trail and you see a group of these guys hanging out, they (the family members) are probably not going to continue on. They are going to turn around. The group may not be doing anything illegal, but their presence is intimidating to a lot of folks."

By having the club adopt the section of Kulshan Creek Trail, Gerondale and Ordoñez hope that others get involved.

"It's great to be able to partner with the college," Gerondale said. "It's really a win-win for everyone. The end result we are looking for is a change in perception. We want people to see a lot of legitimate folks caring for and using the trail. We want to establish legitimate ownership of the trail, rather

than gang ownership."

The club has ventured out onto the trail on two occasions. The first cleanup occurred in November, when 10 club members participated. They returned in October with 18 volunteers.

Bags of garbage were collected, the trail was swept, borders were weeded and the graffiti was painted over.

"It made a huge difference," Gerondale said. "I couldn't be more pleased."

The club will take the month of December off and return in January.

A definite step in the right direction came when several children from the neighborhood joined in to lend a hand. That's the sort of active feedback that Gerondale and Ordoñez hope not only continues, but increases.

"I've seen improvements," Ordoñez said of the trail. "I think that will continue."

Gerondale hopes so.

"It is looking much better," he said. "Just a couple of hours

a month can make all the difference. Hopefully, this is just the beginning."

Eventually, Calling All Colors hopes to put up signs designating it as caretaker of this stretch of trail.

The long-range goal is to have different clubs, community groups or service organizations adopt other sections of the trail.

"I want to get more people involved," Ordoñez said. "We'll talk to the welding or construction classes and maybe have them construct a new bridge. Things like that."

"What we want is to make the Kulshan Creek Trail a place where people want to go."

Those interested in joining the Kulshan Creek Adopt-A-Trail program can contact officer Gerondale at 360-336-6271 or by e-mail off the Web site www.geocities.com/kulshan-creek.

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